

Chapter 10
Two Excerpts: The Life of Charlemagne:
The Emperor Himself
(c. 835)
Einhard

[From: Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, in James Harvey Robinson, ed., *Readings in European History* (Boston: Ginn, 1904), 1:126-128.]

Introduction

The first "larger-than-life" figure of the Middle Ages, the emperor Charlemagne (r. 768-814) expanded the political and military boundaries of the Frankish state significantly and strengthened the alliance between the Carolingians and the papacy forged by his father Pepin I (r. 751-768). His most important biographer, Einhard (c. 770-840), was a product of the Palace School that Charlemagne ("Charles the Great") established at Aachen and became a loyal and trusted advisor both to Charles and to his son and successor, Louis the Pious (r. 814-840). Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* set the standard for political biography in the early Middle Ages and gives us an interesting view of the first man to claim the title "Emperor of the Romans" in the West since late Roman times.

Questions to Consider

- What do you make of Einhard's physical description of the king? How does it shape your view of Einhard as a biographer?
- Considering what you know about conditions in the West during this time, why is Charlemagne's profound interest in learning so remarkable?

Charles was large and robust, of commanding stature and excellent proportions, for it appears that he measured in height seven times the length of his own foot. The top of his head was round, his eyes large and animated, his nose somewhat long. He had a fine head of gray hair, and his face was bright and pleasant; so that, whether standing or sitting, he showed great presence and dignity. Although his neck was thick and rather short, and his belly too prominent, still the good proportions of his limbs concealed these defects. His walk was firm, and the whole carriage of his body was manly. His voice was clear, but not so strong as his frame would have led one to expect....

He took constant exercise in riding and hunting, which was natural for a Frank, since scarcely any nation can be found to equal them in these pursuits....

He wore the dress of his native country, that is, the Frankish; [and] he thoroughly disliked the dress of foreigners, however fine; and he never put it on except at Rome....

1 In his eating and drinking he was temperate; more particularly so in his drinking, for he
2 had the greatest abhorrence of drunkenness in anybody, but more especially in himself and his
3 companions. He was unable to abstain from food for any length of time, and often complained
4 that fasting was injurious to him. On the other hand, he very rarely feasted, only on great festive
5 occasions, when there were very large gatherings. The daily service of his table consisted of only
6 four dishes in addition to the roast meat, which the hunters used to bring in on spits, and of
7 which he partook more freely than of any other food.

8
9 While he was dining he listened to music or reading. History and the deeds of men of old
10 were most often read. He derived much pleasure from the works of St. Augustine, especially
11 from his book called The City of God.... While he was dressing and binding on his sandals, he
12 would receive his friends; and also, if the count of the palace announced that there was any case
13 which could only be settled by his decision, the suitors were immediately ordered into his
14 presence, and he heard the case and gave judgment as if sitting in court. And this was not the
15 only business that he used to arrange at that time, for he also gave orders for whatever had to be
16 done on that day by any officer or servant.

17
18 He was ready and fluent in speaking, and able to express himself with great clearness. He
19 did not confine himself to his native tongue, but took pains to learn foreign languages, acquiring
20 such knowledge of Latin that he could make an address in that language as well as in his own.
21 Greek he could better understand than speak. Indeed, he was so polished in speech that he might
22 have passed for a learned man.

23
24 He was an ardent admirer of the liberal arts, and greatly revered their professors, whom
25 he promoted to high honors. In order to learn grammar, he attended the lectures of the aged Peter
26 of Pisa, a deacon; and for other branches he chose as his preceptor Albinus, otherwise called
27 Alcuin, also a deacon, - a Saxon by race, from Britain, the most learned man of the day, with
28 whom the king spent much time in learning rhetoric and logic, and more especially astronomy.
29 He learned the art of determining the dates upon which the movable festivals of the Church fall,
30 and with deep thought and skill most carefully calculated the courses of the planets. Charles also
31 tried to learn to write, and used to keep his tablets and writing book under the pillow of his
32 couch, that when he had leisure he might practice his hand in forming letters; but he made little
33 progress in this task, too long deferred and begun too late in life.

The Life of Charlemagne (ca. 829-836)

[From Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, in Kishlansky, Mark A., ed., *Sources of the West: Readings in Western Civilization*. Pearson. Boston. 1:141-143.]

Einhard (ca. 770-840) was a prominent scholar and historian of the reign of Charlemagne. Little has been preserved concerning Einhard's youth, although it is supposed that he was born in Germany near the monastery of Fulda where he was educated. While at Fulda, he developed a reputation as a brilliant scholar, and he soon entered Charlemagne's court in the city of Aachen, which was renowned for its intellectual sophistication – despite the fact that the emperor himself could not write – and where many promising young scholars came to serve. Einhard took a position as a teacher in the school that trained the children of the nobility. Einhard grew to become one of the emperor's most trusted advisors.

The Life of Charlemagne was written during Einhard's retirement, between 829 and 836. It was produced as a token of gratitude to the emperor as well as to teach Charlemagne's sons about the achievements of their father. Although it is based on classical models, The Life was the first medieval biography of a layman. It became one of the most frequently copied works of the Middle Ages.

Questions

1. What does Einhard's biography tell us about the education and upbringing of royal children? How does Charlemagne treat his children, and is he, by the standards of the time, a successful father?
2. Although Charlemagne was never literate, Einhard still counted him a learned man. How did the emperor qualify for this distinction?
3. In what ways was Charlemagne a model king?
4. What would you say is the message that Einhard is trying to put across with his work? How does he do it?

Private Life and Character of Charlemagne

I have shown, then, how Charles protected and expanded his kingdom and also what splendor he gave to it. I shall now go on to speak of his mental endowments, of his steadiness of purpose under whatever circumstances of prosperity or adversity, and of all that concerns his private and domestic life.

In educating his children he determined to train them, both sons and daughters, in those liberal studies to which he himself paid great attention. Further, he made his sons, as soon as their age permitted it, learn to ride like true Franks, and practice the use of arms and hunting. He ordered his daughters to learn wool work and devote attention to the spindle and distaff, for the avoidance of idleness and lethargy, and to be trained to the adoption of high principles.

He bore the deaths of his two sons and of his daughters with less patience than might have been expected from his usual stoutness of heart, for his domestic affection, a quality for which he was as remarkable as for courage, forced him to shed tears. Moreover, when the death of Hadrian, the Roman Pontiff, whom he reckoned as the chief of his friends, was announced to him, he wept for him as though he had lost a brother or a very dear son. For he showed a very fine disposition I his friendships: he

1 embraced them readily and maintained them faithfully, and he treated with the utmost respect all whom
2 he had admitted into the circle of his friends.

3
4 He had such care of the upbringing of his sons and daughters that he never dined without them
5 when he was at home, and never travelled without them. His sons rode along with him, and his daughters
6 followed in the rear. Some of his guards, chosen for this very purpose, watched the end of the line of
7 march where his daughters travelled. They were very beautiful, and much beloved by their father, and,
8 therefore, it is strange that he would give them in marriage to no one, either among his own people or of a
9 foreign state. But up to his death he kept them all at home, saying that he could not forgo their society.
10 And hence the good fortune that followed him in all other respects was here broken by the touch of
11 scandal and failure. He shut his eyes, however, to everything, and acted as though no suspicion of
12 anything amiss had reached him, or as if the rumor of it had been discredited.

13
14 He had a great love for foreigners, and took such pains to entertain them that their numbers were
15 justly reckoned to be a burden not only to the palace but to the kingdom at large. But, with his usual
16 loftiness of spirit, he took little note of such charges, for he found in the reputation of generosity and in
17 the good fame that followed such actions a compensation even for grave inconveniences.

18
19 He paid the greatest attention to the liberal arts, and showed the greatest respect and bestowed
20 high honors upon those who taught them. For his lessons in grammar he listened to the instruction of
21 Deacon Peter of Pisa, and old man; but for all other subjects Albinus, called Alcuin, also a deacon, was
22 his teacher – a man from Britain, of the Saxon race, and the most learned man of his time. Charles spent
23 much time and labor in learning rhetoric and dialectic, and especially astronomy, from Alcuin. He learnt,
24 too, the art of reckoning, and with close application scrutinized most carefully the course of the stars. He
25 tried also to learn to write, and for this purpose used to carry with him and keep under the pillow of his
26 couch tablets and writing-sheets that he might in his spare moments accustom himself to the formation of
27 letters. But he made little advance in this strange task, which was begun too late in life.

28
29 He paid the most devout and pious regard to the Christian religion, in which he had been brought
30 up from infancy. And, therefore, he built the great and most beautiful church at Aix, and decorated it with
31 gold and silver and candelabras and with wicket-gates and doors of solid brass. And, since he could not
32 procure marble columns elsewhere for the building of it, he had them brought from Rome and Ravenna.
33 As long as his health permitted it he used diligently to attend the church both in the morning and evening,
34 and during the night, and at the time of the Sacrifice. He took the greatest care to have all the services of
35 the church performed with the utmost dignity, and constantly warned the keepers of the building not to
36 allow anything improper or dirty either to be brought into or to remain in the building. He provided so
37 great a quantity of gold and silver vessels, and so large a supply of priestly vestments, that at the religious
38 services not even the doorkeepers, who form the lowest ecclesiastical order, had to officiate in their
39 ordinary dress. He carefully reformed the manner of reading and singing; for he was thoroughly instructed
40 in both, though he never read publicly himself, nor sang except in a low voice, and with the rest of the
41 congregation.

42
43 He was most devout in relieving the poor and in those free gifts which the Greeks call alms. For
44 he gave it his attention not only in his own country and in his own kingdom, but he also used to send
45 money across the sea to Syria, to Egypt, to Africa – to Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Carthage – in
46 compassion for the poverty of any Christians whose miserable condition in those countries came to his
47 ears. It was for this reason chiefly that he cultivated the friendship of kings beyond the sea, hoping
48 thereby to win for the Christians living beneath their sway some succor and relief.

49
50 Beyond all other sacred and venerable places he loved the church of the holy Apostle Peter at
51 Rome, and he poured into its treasury great wealth in silver and gold and precious stones. He sent

1 innumerable gifts to the Pope; and during the whole course of his reign he strove with all his might (and
2 indeed, no object was nearer to his heart than this) to restore to the city of Rome her ancient authority, and
3 not merely to defend the church of Saint peter but to decorate and enrich it out of his resources above all
4 other churches. But although he valued Rome so much, still, during all the forty-seven years that he
5 reigned, he only went there four times to pay his vows and offer up his prayers.
6

7 When he had taken the imperial title he noticed many defects in the legal systems of his people;
8 for the Franks have two legal systems, differing in many points very widely from one another, and he,
9 therefore, determined to add what was lacking, to reconcile the differences, and to amend anything that
10 was wrong or wrongly expressed. He completed nothing of all his designs beyond adding a few
11 capitularies, and those unfinished. But he gave orders that the laws and rules of all nations comprised
12 within his dominions which were not already written out should be collected and committed to writing.
13

14 He also wrote out the barbarous and ancient songs, in which the acts of the kings and their wars
15 were sung, and committed them to memory. He also began a grammar of his native language.